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SUBJECT: FOREIGN MINISTER SHALOM EXPRESSES SKEPTICISM ABOUT
ABU MAZEN TO CODELS KERRY AND KYL

Classified By: Ambassador Daniel C. Kurtzer for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

11. (C) Summary: In separate January 10 meetings with Codels Kerry and Kyl, both joined by the Ambassador, Foreign Minister Shalom articulated Israel's cautious readiness to work with Palestinian President-elect Abu Mazen. Shalom emphasized that Israel will measure Abu Mazen by his performance in dismantling terrorist organizations, but he was skeptical about Abu Mazen's willingness to do so, citing some of Abu Mazen's recent campaign statements as a possible indication that he has become less moderate. In his meeting with Codel Kerry, Shalom expressed reservations as well about Syria's willingness to make peace, and underlined the symbolic importance of democratic elections in Iraq. During his meeting with Codel Kyl, Shalom stressed Israel's grave concerns about Iran's nuclear program, and called for immediate referral of it to the Security Council. Shalom lauded Israel's strategic relationship with Turkey. End Summary.

Abu Mazen: The Morning After

12. (C) Foreign Minister Silvan Shalom met separately with Codels Kerry and Kyl, both joined by the Ambassador, on the morning after Mahmoud Abbas (Abu Mazen) won the Palestinian presidential election. He expressed cautious optimism about the President-elect, emphasizing that Israel is ready to work directly with the Palestinians towards achieving peace. He stressed, however, that Abu Mazen must take steps to dismantle terrorist organizations and end incitement against Israel. The crucial test for Abu Mazen, he said, will come with the first terrorist attack that occurs on Abu Mazen's watch. The nature of the Israeli response, Shalom said, "will be one thing" if Abu Mazen appears to be actively trying to dismantle terrorist groups, and "quite another" if he is not. Asked whether Abu Mazen has the resources necessary to dismantle terrorist infrastructure and fight incitement, Shalom responded that Abu Mazen, with 60,000 people in the PA security services, and Dahlan in Gaza, has more than sufficient resources to defeat the terrorists. The question is only whether he is determined to do so. Incitement, Shalom continued, could be fought immediately. To illustrate the latter point, Shalom mentioned a sermon that was broadcast live on Palestinian television January 7 and filled with "unspeakable" statements about Jews. Ending such incitement, he claimed, would be as easy as flipping a switch

13. (C) Asked about a future meeting between Prime Minister Ariel Sharon and Abu Mazen, Shalom predicted that such a meeting would take place within weeks and stressed the importance of good preparation for it. He claimed that Israel has done all it could to date to ensure Abu Mazen's success with the Palestinians by facilitating Arafat's medical travel and burial, easing Palestinian travel restrictions prior to and during elections, and allowing free access to polling places. Abu Mazen, he said, won the presidency through a healthy voter turnout of approximately 70% of registered voters. Israel will not tolerate any excuses from him claiming that the PA is too weak or otherwise unable to take necessary steps against terrorism. The time for decisive Palestinian action is now.

14. (C) Senator Kerry expressed concern that the absence of clear Israeli expectations for Palestinian security performance could set up Abu Mazen to fail. He asked whether Israel would seek to develop benchmarks or a timetable to measure Palestinian progress. Shalom circuitously responded that his trepidation regarding Abu Mazen has more to do with his recent "unacceptable" statements to the press, which, instead of isolating extremists and embracing moderates, could have the opposite effect. Recalling how Arafat's zealous speech at the White House signing of the Oslo Accords reflected his genuine extremism, Shalom said he could not dismiss Abu Mazen's commentary as simply campaign rhetoric. Abu Mazen's recent reference to Israel as the "Zionist enemy," his promises to continue the Palestinian struggle "with all means we have," and to "never abandon the right of return," make Shalom more skeptical now about chances for peace with the Palestinians than he was immediately following

Arafat's death. Still, he does not want Israel to lose the glimmer of hope that Arafat's death has presented.

15. (C) Shalom summarized his feelings towards Abu Mazen by emphasizing that now that Abu Mazen has the support of the Palestinian people and the greater Arab world, he will be expected to live up to implementing Palestinian commitments under the roadmap. Shalom acknowledged that Israel will likewise have to live up to its commitments, including dismantling illegal outposts. Shalom said that, as a result of Abu Mazen's recent "extreme" statements, he is more skeptical about Abu Mazen's potential to succeed, but he emphasized that Israel remains prepared to offer the Palestinians gestures of cooperation, such as issuing more work authorizations.

Syria and the Region

16. (C) In response to Shalom's question about Kerry's January 8 trip to Syria, the Senator stated that he believes there is potential for Syria's participation in a regional peace process. There are, he said, specific ways in which the U.S. could test Syrian intentions by cooperating in the realms of intelligence gathering and monitoring of the Syria-Iraq border. These measures could build confidence for future discussions between Syria and Israel on a return of the Golan Heights, which Kerry qualified as Syria's top priority. Shalom demurred, stating that Lebanon was more important to the Syrians than the Golan because of the resources located there and revenue from drug trade through the Bekaa Valley. Syria's apparent peace overtures, Shalom continued, are a response to Washington's threats to impose sanctions. While he acknowledged that moderate statements by Arab leaders should not be taken for granted, Shalom said he also believes that Syria can more easily talk about peace than take action against Islamic Jihad and Hamas, who still direct Palestinian terrorism from Damascus.

17. (C) Kerry posited that Assad would become more active against terrorist groups if given the assurance that he would get something in return. For example, Assad is already prepared to shut down the border with Iraq and is willing to conduct joint intelligence operations. Shalom responded that Assad could start to demonstrate his willingness to work with Israel by giving back the body of Israeli spy Eli Cohen, whom Syria executed in 1965. Kerry agreed that the SARG should return the body, but noted a general sense of waiting that he sees in the region. Arab leaders, he said, are growing uneasy with their inability to get a feel for how Israel and the Palestinians will return to the roadmap, while Iraq remains delicate and unstable. This waiting, he said, creates an opportunity for Israel to take steps toward peace now.

Iraq

18. (C) Shalom was optimistic about the future of Iraq and said that once democratic elections occur, citizens of other Arab countries will be encouraged to demand the right to vote from their governments. Israel looks forward to having another democratic nation in the region, and would be in favor of relations with the new Iraqi leadership. As for the violence throughout the country, Shalom said that Iraq is a big country and the violence portrayed by the media does not necessarily affect the lives of all Iraqis and all reconstruction efforts.

Iran

19. (C) In his meeting with Codel Kyl, Shalom turned to the issue of Iran's nuclear program, describing it as a "nightmare" for Israel. Iran, he said, will do everything in its power to develop a nuclear bomb. Right now, he said, Iran is trying to "buy time" in order to pursue its true interests, which are hostile to Israel. He said that now that the U.S. presidential election is over, the time has come to bring the issue before the Security Council. Asked what would be the next step after moving the issue to the Security Council, Shalom said that Iran should face sanctions and if it still fails to comply, "we should stop them." Recognizing Europe's economic interests, he acknowledged that it is "not so easy to put pressure on Iran." He commended France for being "the toughest" on Iran, and also commended the UK stance. The Germans, he said, are not as tough on Iran as they should be.

Turkey

¶10. (C) Shalom lauded Israel's relationship with Turkey, which he referred to as "the only Muslim democracy." Turkey, he said, is an example that the tenets of Islam and democracy are not contradictory. Israel enjoys good strategic relations with Turkey, which Shalom hopes will help bridge the gap between Israel and the rest of the Arab world.

¶11. (U) Codel Kerry consisted of Senator John Kerry, senior foreign policy advisor Nancy Stetson, press secretary David Wade, and military escort Col. Michael Barbero. Codel Kyl consisted of Senators Jon Kyl, Lisa Murkowski and Mel Martinez, Rep. Adam Smith, Brandon Wales, senior foreign policy advisor to Sen. Kyl, and military escorts LTC Sam Mundy and Maj. Pete McAleer.

¶12. (U) Codel Kerry cleared this message.

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KURTZER